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Thesis/Project

**NARRATIVE THEOLOGY AND NARRATIVE COUNSELING:
IMPLICATIONS FOR PASTORAL CARE**

BY

THOMAS EOYANG, JR.

M.A., Stanford University, 1975

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF DIVINITY

2003

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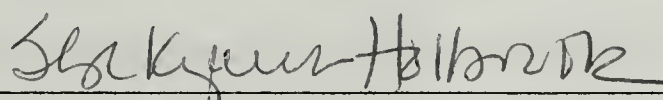
Approved By

Supervisor



The Rev. Dr. William M. Kondrath
Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology

Reader



The Rev. Dr. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook
Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very pleased to have this opportunity to thank every single member of the distinguished faculty of the Episcopal Divinity School for the unimaginable education, formation, support, and friendship that I have had the privilege to enjoy these past three years. With regard to this specific project, I must particularly thank the Rev. Dr. William M. Kondrath, my primary advisor, who very gently encouraged me to keep going on the many days when mental fatigue and self-doubt brought me to the verge of scrapping the project entirely, and who has been a steady source of sane and sage advice throughout my three-year struggle to discern a call to ordained priesthood; the Rev. Dr. Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, who kindly agreed to be the second reader, steered me toward resources in the pastoral care literature that I would not have encountered on my own, encouraged me to include voices from social locations closer to my own, and refrained from deluging me with the countless photocopied articles that would have undoubtedly made this project better; the Rev. Dr. Christopher Duraisingh, who read my overly sketchy thesis proposal and critiqued it with a thoughtfulness, imagination, and caring that it perhaps did not deserve; and finally to Dr. Kwok Pui Lan, who, though she did not participate directly in the development of this thesis project, offered me through our student-teacher and editor-writer relationships the role modeling, inspiration, and challenge I needed to see a scholarly project through to the end. It goes without saying that none of these esteemed teachers is responsible for any of the faults of this effort, though if there is any interest or insight—pastoral, theological, or spiritual—to be found herein, they may each and every one claim no small share of the credit.

PREFACE

The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is ‘a vale of tears’ from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven—What a little circumscribed straightened notion! Call the world if you Please “The vale of Soul-making” Then you will find out the use of the world. . . . I say ‘*Soul-making*’ Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence—There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions—but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. . . . Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?

John Keats, *Letters*

This essay is an exploration of narrative theology as a theological development of the twentieth century, and it suggests connections to and implications for pastoral ministry in the specific area of pastoral counseling. I had come across the term “narrative theology” several times in the coursework towards a master of divinity, first as a tantalizing appendix to Timothy Sedgwick’s *The Christian Moral Life: Practices of Piety* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999). To limit the scope of what I quickly discovered would be an unwieldy enterprise, I sought to narrow my concerns to what a practicing pastor might wish to learn about the subject. Even that proved too large an ambition, and so I chose to inquire into possible connections between narrative theology and narrative counseling theory. This resulted in the essay’s present contours: Chapter One presents a focused overview of narrative theology, concentrating on propositions related to the narrative shape of human experience and the narrative issues related to scriptural understanding. Chapter Two provides a discussion of narrative counseling theory and briefly explores some specific

applications. Chapter Three attempts a more extended application of narrative approaches to the pastoral concerns related to dying and bereavement.

As every utterance is made at a particular time and place by a particular person, it may be useful to know my starting place as I embarked on this project. First, it should be noted that I read as a neophyte theology student with the rusty instruments of a literary scholar—literary study being a previous vocation, which, though abandoned, led to a renewed interest when the term “narrative theology” was encountered. I confess to scanty preparation in the disciplines of either philosophy or psychology—both of which would have equipped me better to comprehend and challenge the reading involved in the project. I also write from the privileged social location of a Chinese-American, born and educated in New York City, and descended through both parents from the literate and even literary middle classes of traditional China.

Lastly, it should be understood that I write as a reluctant postmodern. Had I possessed more of the tools I feel would have been useful to the project, I might have aspired to write as generous and clear a work as Loughlin’s *Telling God’s Story* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996). Among its helpful bonuses is its succinct recapitulation of the postmodern dilemma. I do not join those who, in Loughlin’s description, have declared the postmodern age to be the end of history—“not the dawning of a new age, but of a day without a tomorrow, a time without a future. . . .”

There is a vast proliferation in all areas of life, but without direction, for without a future there can be no direction or point to our endeavours. We are not governed but managed, and efficiency is our watchword. But we no longer know why or care. For some this is wonderful; for others it is more terrible than anything imagined by the Seer of Patmos (Loughlin 1996, 4-5).

I count myself among the latter group, and moreover posit that the true end of human history will be an event that no living human will actually survive to identify or write about, and that to declare such while we are still here, presumably capable of some agency, is merely another academic gesture of Babelian cleverness, arrogance, and obtuseness.

I do, however, accept that we have somehow moved past the modern sense of confidence in the constant process of human improvement through science and technology. I accept that the paradigms of logical positivism have, if not failed, at least reached the limits of their power to generate human progress—or, rather, their power to advance human happiness as a result of material progress. But I have been surprised, in my brief return to the academic world after more than twenty years away, that all the discussion of the postmodern seems to consider itself an innovation. The sense of uneasiness in the face of logical positivism, the objections to the claims of the Enlightenment, the suspicion that proclamations of consistent human progress leading to some utopian endpoint—whether it was to be the triumph of the proletariat and the withering away of the state; the perfection of society through capitalist exploitation of natural and human resources and galloping scientific progress whose benefits would somehow trickle prosperity down to all people; or some other comprehensive vision informed by economics, genetics, cybernetics, or pharmacology—this suspicion has been available to human consideration at least since the Romantics, and has buzzed anxiously in our ears in different guises throughout the era of twentieth-century modernism.

To me, the critical consideration has ever been one of anthropology—deciding not so much who God is in our lives—the project of theology—but deciding more simply who we

are to each other. If we are merely flesh, then schemes—Marxist or otherwise—to ensure that we were all fed and housed might suffice to achieve some kind of utopian equilibrium. If we are amalgams of flesh and spirit, then meeting our needs becomes a considerably more complex proposition. But it is only if we have some anthropology like the one that considers us all children of God, inhabiting God’s creation, that we actually might consider it an imperative to strive toward meeting our collective needs with equity and justice, and to provide the spaces for our souls to find nourishment and meaning. I do not perceive that postmodern thinking has sought to reconsider questions of anthropology, nor to attend to the huge numbers of disenfranchised people around the world who may have little use for such intellectual paradigm shifts, but who quite clearly understand the impact of Western capitalist triumphalism on their own lives, and who are preparing quite effectively to make sure that is not where history ends. My occasional disputes with various writers discussed in this essay sometimes point to deficiencies of argument, and sometimes suggest more important differences in anthropological paradigms. Paradigms may well be shifting, but I do not credit postmodernism with achieving the end of all paradigms. I simply believe we are between paradigms, as the unemployed are said to be between jobs, and that, if we’re not watchful, we may possibly miss the new paradigms (or possibly old ones disguised as new) that are slouching toward Bethlehem to be born.

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Chapter One

A FOCUSED OVERVIEW OF NARRATIVE THEOLOGY

There are several available overviews of narrative theology, each more learned and more complete than what can be attempted here (McGrath 2001, 167-170; Stroup 1992; Fackre 1983). Moreover, there are many book-length treatments of the subject, several of which might be considered core texts: Hauerwas and Jones (1989), Ricoeur (1995), and Loughlin (1996). Critiques of narrative theology are also available (Jones 1996, Beaumont 1997).

In these overviews, it is difficult to find many definitions of “narrative theology,” or even to get a sense of what kind of entity it is. McGrath (2001) calls narrative theology “one of the most important theological movements to develop in the last few decades” (167). Stroup (1992) demurs and says “it would be misleading and inaccurate to suggest there is a school or movement of narrative theology that embodies a common understanding of what is meant by the term and what role it should play in theology” (323-324). Stroup prefers to call narrative a “theme” in theology (323ff). Fackre (1983) may have the most accurate formulation when he refers to his subject as “the theological conversation about ‘story’,” which, he continues, “is influenced by fields as diverse as literary criticism, psychology, linguistics, social ethics and communications theory, with formulations showing the marks of these pursuits and the partisans within them” (340). Fackre is also the only writer I could find who would venture a succinct definition: “Taking into account its very wide borders, narrative theology is discourse about God in

the setting of story” (343)—certainly a generous enough definition to account for a broad variety of discourse and procedures. McGrath contents himself with identifying “the basic feature” of narrative theology, which is “the particular attention it pays to narratives, or stories, in relation to Christian theology” (167). It is interesting that in the introduction to their well-known anthology, Hauerwas and Jones (1989) do not once use the term “narrative theology” as such, despite its appearance in the book’s subtitle. They seem to take care instead to keep to phrases such as “the significance of narrative for theology,” “narrative’s relation to theology and ethics,” and “theological conceptions of the significance of narrative.” As interesting, not one of the articles included uses “narrative theology” as part of its title. Hauerwas and Jones do not, of course, offer a definition of the term; the closest they come is to describe their intentions in compiling the anthology:

We are concerned with suggesting that narrative is neither just an account of genre criticism nor a faddish appeal to the importance of telling stories; rather it is a crucial conceptual category for such matters as understanding issues of epistemology and methods of argument, depicting personal identity, and displaying the content of Christian convictions (Hauerwas and Jones 1989, 5).

Fackre, McGrath, and Stroup all offer accounts of how and why narrative theology arose when it did, and not one of the accounts resembles the others in the particulars, though it is possible that a scholarly theologian could reconcile them in their general outlines. Stroup divides the literature into “four distinct fields”: (1) the use of narrative in biblical studies; (2) narrative hermeneutics; (3) the role of narrative in theological construction; and (4) the role of narrative in ethics and practical theology.

It would be impossible to survey the entire literature of narrative theology or even one of these four areas with any depth or insight while still keeping my own aims in view.

I will instead discuss two main themes that seem to underlie many if not most of the contributions to this “theological conversation”: narrative as the form of human experience, and narrative as the dominant form in Scripture.

Narrative and Human Experience

One of the tenets enunciated by several voices in narrative theology is that human experience is essentially narrative. “Crites turns to the tradition of phenomenology to argue that human existence and human experience are fundamentally narrative in form (Hauerwas and Jones 1989, 8).” Alasdair MacIntyre argues in more detail that

(1) intelligible human action is narrative in form, (2) human life has a fundamentally narrative shape, (3) humans are story-telling animals, (4) people place their lives and arguments in narrative histories, (5) communities and (6) traditions receive their continuities through narrative histories, and (7) epistemological progress is marked by the construction and reconstruction of more adequate narratives and forms of narrative (Hauerwas and Jones 1989, 8).

Philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues that human emotions are social constructs, and that these constructs are formed “in and through the narratives of particular societies” (Hauerwas and Jones 1989, 13). Of the discussions of the narrative quality of human experience, the article “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” by Stephen Crites (1971), is widely cited as a foundational document for narrative theology (cf. McGrath 2001, Stroup 1981 and 1992, Beaumont 1997).

Crites’ fundamental argument is “that the formal quality of experience is inherently narrative” (291). He begins by conflating the temporal qualities of experience, style (which he associates exclusively with movement and thus with temporality), and music (which he calls “the aesthetic idealization of style . . . so to speak, the style of style.

In music style is no longer ancillary to an action with some other aim, but is itself the sole aim of the action” (293).

Crites distinguishes between sacred and mundane stories. Sacred stories are those that, within traditional cultures,

were told, especially on festal occasions, that had special resonance. Not only told but ritually re-enacted, these stories seem to be allusive expressions of stories that cannot be fully and directly told. . . . [T]hey form consciousness rather than being among the objects of which it is directly aware. . . . They are anonymous and communal. . . . Such stories, and the symbolic worlds they project, are not like monuments that men behold but like dwelling-places. People live in them. Yet even though they are not directly told, even though a culture seems rather to be the telling than the teller of these stories, their form seems to be narrative. They are moving forms, at once musical and narrative, which inform people’s sense of the story of which their own lives are a part, of the moving course of their own action and experience (295).

By contrast, mundane stories are “the stories that are told, all stories directly seen and heard.”

In order to be told, a story must be set within a world. It may not be an everyday world, i.e., it may be an imaginatively augmented world. . . . Historically there have been a variety of such worlds, correlative to the historical forms of consciousness. The stories of an age or a culture take place within its world. Only in that sense are they necessarily mundane. Here, in some world of consciousness, we find stories composed as works of art as well as the much more modest narrative communications that pass between people in explaining where they have been, why things are as they are, and so on. Set within a world or consciousness, the mundane stories are also among the most important means by which people articulate and clarify their sense of that world (295-296).

Mundane stories arise within human consciousness, sacred stories outside of it. A sacred story “forms the very consciousness that projects a total world horizon, and therefore informs the intentions by which actions are projected into that world.” Crites resists identifying sacred stories as myths, and indeed says that “even the myths and epics, even the scriptures, are mundane stories,” that “all a people’s mundane stories are implicit in its sacred story,” and that within all mundane stories “the sacred stories resonate” (296).

The form of consciousness is a mediating form between the sacred story and the mundane stories. “Consciousness has a form of its own, without which no coherent experience at all would be possible,” and this form of consciousness is “in at least some rudimentary sense narrative” (297). Basing his arguments on a reading of Augustine, Crites explains that memory gives experience its coherence, and that “memory also has its order, not the recollected order formed by thought and imagination, but a simple order of succession. This succession is the order in which the images of actual experience through time have been impressed upon the memory” (299). Memory as images do not exist “as atomic units, like photographs in an album, but as transient episodes in an image-stream, cinematic, which I must suspend and from which I must abstract in order to isolate a particular image” (300). The same remembered experience can result in different tellings of a story, as one’s insight, knowledge, and perspective changes and develops—as, for example, with age—but each new telling of the story

would be superimposed on the image-stream of the original chronicle. It could not replace the original without obliterating the very materials to be recollected in the new story. Embedded in every sophisticated retelling of such a story is this primitive chronicle preserved in memory (301).

A dramatic tension exists in memory with the tensed modalities of past, present, and future.

The past remembered is fixed, a chronicle that I can radically reinterpret but cannot reverse or displace: what is done cannot be undone! And within this same present the future is, on the contrary, still fluid, awaiting determination, subject to alternative scenarios (302-303).

Crites goes on to discuss that conceptions of time will vary across cultures. He makes a summary statement that “the narrative quality of experience has three dimensions, the sacred story, the mundane stories, and the temporal form of experience

itself: three narrative tracks, each constantly reflecting and affecting the course of the others” (305). He discusses the relation between narrative and symbol, making the point that “narrative form, and not the symbol as such, is primitive in experience” (306).

Crites concludes his essay by situating his proposal in the tension between the modern and the postmodern. He attributes to the modern age “the employment of quite different strategies for breaking the sense of narrative time.”

One is the strategy of abstraction, in which images and qualities are detached from experience to become data for the formation of generalized principles and techniques. Such abstraction enables us to give experience a new, non-narrative and atemporal coherence. It is an indispensable strategy for conducting many of the practical affairs of life in our society. . . . [The] other type we may call the strategy of contraction. Here narrative temporality is again fragmented, not by abstraction to systems of generality, but by the constriction of attention to dissociated immediacies: to the particular image isolated from the image stream, to isolated sensation, feeling, the flash of the overpowering moment in which the temporal context of that moment is eclipsed and past and future are deliberately blocked out of consciousness. It is commonly assumed that this dissociated immediacy is what is concrete and irreducible in experience (308-309).

He blames both of these strategies for projecting the “distinctively modern” dualism between mind and body, and bemoans the mutual antagonism—“played off ever more violently”—that this dualism has spawned, especially in the university, especially in the humanities. He offers his proposal of the narrative quality of experience as the postmodern solution to the dilemma of modern dualism. He offers this revolutionary, “new sacred story” as one that

has united the angry children of poverty and the alienated children of abundance in a common moral passion and a common sense of the meaning of their experience. Among those for whom the story is alive there is a revival of ethical authority otherwise almost effaced in our society. For it establishes on a new basis the coherency of social and personal time. It makes it possible to recover a living past, to believe again in the future, to perform acts that have significance for the person who acts. By so doing it restores a human form of experience (311).

Attractive as Crites' conclusions are, and as influential as his article has clearly been, there are several problems with it, aside from the nonsense about music. Daniel Beaumont (1997) criticizes him for relying too heavily on the power of memory, and indeed Crites' account of memory seems simplistic. "The past remembered is fixed, a chronicle that I can radically reinterpret but cannot reverse or displace: what is done cannot be undone!" Had he left out the word "remembered" I might have agreed with him. The past, certainly, is fixed—assuming we could determine definitively what happened in the past—but our memories of it are constantly shifting, not just in the telling and retelling, but in their essence. The work of Proust is conceivably the most impressive demonstration of the mutability, the rich shape-shifting of the past remembered.

More importantly, Beaumont points out that Crites' arguments show "that our experience as we live it is not narrative in form but only becomes so upon reflection" (Beaumont 1997, 136). I agree with Beaumont that throughout his article, Crites conflates experience with the expressions of experience, and consciousness with the formulations of consciousness. Because he sees that many expressions and formulations are found to be narrative, he takes the basic shape of consciousness and experience to be also narrative. I do not believe that this is a quibble about postmodernism—that I have failed to accept the credal affirmations of the rest of my age, that "all we have is language," that "all is text," or that "there is nothing outside the text." I accept that all we have *that we can talk about* are the concrete expressions of ephemeral constructs that we call experience or consciousness, which is why I am not seeking myself to propose an

alternative characterization of either experience or consciousness. I do question, however, whether the shape of our texts and expressions tells us anything essential about the underlying realities. I question further whether narrative—however universal it may seem, however accessible to every culture and every individual—is always the way in which we understand ourselves and give our experience meaning. It may be the most pervasive form of understanding, of meaning-making; it may even be the most morally apt. But what Crites considers the dual oppressions of technical abstraction and atomizing contraction are still powerful paradigms in the world today. Statistical probabilities and market analyses on the one hand, and sensual pleasure and drug-induced euphoria on the other, matter to a great many people—are in fact core principles of how they understand the world—no matter how existentially unsatisfying others may find these modes of understanding. While postmodern minds are declaring these strategies to be dead ends, the Dick Cheneys and Rupert Murdochs of the world continue to exploit them—in the forms, separately and combined, of technocapitalism and sexual prurience masquerading as information—to agglomerate ever greater power in the hands of ever fewer individuals for ever more ungodly ends.

Even if one were to accept Crites' argument in toto, he does not address a concern that has important significance for pastoral care, and indeed for any interpersonal communication that invites us to create individual and communal meaning from the stories we tell: the quality of the story being told. By quality I mean more even than truthfulness or adherence to the "facts" of history, to the chronicle of the actual events. Quality would also encompass the fullness and relevance of the details of narration; the

unconscious as well as conscious influences that affect the telling of the tale, and the revisions that creep into the tale as a result of these influences; the ability of the teller of the tale to tell stories to begin with—some of us know “how” to tell a story and others do not. We are not all competent story-tellers, even in our own interest. It is not the existence of stories themselves, but the “how” of the telling that makes all the difference in what story is told, how it is received, and what use can be made of it to achieve meaning.

Narrative and Scripture

Hans Frei’s work, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, published in 1974, is often cited, along with Crites’ article, as a foundational document for narrative theology. A single chapter, “Apologetics, Criticism, and the Loss of Narrative Interpretation,” is reprinted in the anthology edited by Hauerwas and Jones. Frei’s argument is learned and complex. What I think he is saying, at least in part, is that sometime after the Enlightenment, we lost the ability to read scripture as our experience, as describing a reality that in some way was continuous with reality as we recognize it in our contemporary consciousness. Whereas before, the meaningfulness of scripture did not depend on our belief in its historical factuality, the issue of its factuality became increasingly important with the rise of historical criticism through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The historical critic does something other than narrative interpretation with a narrative because he looks for what the narrative refers to or what reconstructed historical context outside itself explains it. He is not wrong when he does this, but unfortunately he is also not apt to see the logical difference between what he does and what a narrative

interpretation might be and what it might yield. He is likely to think instead that a procedure that is neither a practical religious use of the narratives (a use which he sometimes though not always countenances), nor yet his own method with its particular conceptual tools, simply cannot exist; and certainly he does not believe that it can have the serious implications for a religious use of the narratives that he expects from the fruits of his own procedure. Nor would he easily tolerate the notion that his own procedure and narrative interpretation might have to live side by side without yielding a single overall fruit for a given narrative, that the two procedures might in given cases have divergent outcomes impossible to bring into harmonious balance (Frei 1974, 54).

Frei links this new-found inability to read scripture as a narrative that includes us not only to historical criticism, but also to the rise of the English novel, which rendered lived reality by such radically different linguistic methods from the ones used by scripture. The seeds of these different methods were already elucidated by Erich Auerbach in his magisterial work, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* a classic of the literary study of narrative to which several of those writing on narrative theology refer with respect, including Frei himself (cf., for example, Stroup 1981, 80). Auerbach opens his study with a comparison of the story of Abraham sacrificing Isaac with an incident from Homer's *Odyssey* to show the uniqueness of Biblical narrative discourse.

Frei argues that in this change in how we view scriptural narrative, "such sense of a narrative framework as continued to exist among religious (and not merely scholarly) readers was now no longer chiefly that of providentially governed biblical history." It had been true, in the traditional scheme, that "every present moral and historical experience had been fitted into it by bestowing on the present experience a figural interpretation that adapted it into the governing biblical narrative. All this had now changed" (63). I believe Frei is saying that our lived narratives, even when seen in

Christian perspective, could no longer be seen as truly continuous with, or as part of the same world as, the biblical narrative.

The richness of Paul Ricoeur's contribution to the understanding of narrative theology can hardly be overestimated. I will restrict my discussion to his remarks on biblical narrative in the essay "Toward a Narrative Theology: Its Necessity, Its Resources, Its Difficulties," first published as an article in 1983 (Ricoeur 1995). He resists one key idea to which many other writers on narrative theology subscribe—that the project of narrative theology has to do with what Frei calls "the governing biblical narrative, or what we will see Robert McAfee Brown calling "The Story."

To my mind the project of a narrative theology is not identical to that of a theology of history—if we mean by a theology of history an attempt to construe world-history in a Hegelian sense under the guidance of a *Heilsgeschichte*, proceeding from Genesis to Revelation, and punctuated by such saving events as the exodus and the resurrection (Ricoeur 1995, 237).

Ricoeur advises that "we should not speak of 'the biblical narrative,' but . . . of 'the Christian pattern'" (237). If we accept his reservations, "one of the tasks of a narrative theology would be to liberate the biblical narratives from the constraints of the 'Christian pattern' and ultimately the multiplex network of biblical narratives from the univocally chronological schema of the history of salvation" (238).

Ricoeur does not deny that an all-encompassing story might exist. He points out, however, that

it can be told only through the stories collected and gathered within its range. In that sense, beside the detail-stories, it is, as such, an unspeakable story. . . . [T]he story of the partnership between God and Israel is, as such, not only open and ongoing but unfathomable and unspeakable. At that point the character of the metastory as that which cannot be told joins the theological theme of God's ineffability. Or rather the ineffability of the Name is the same thing as the inexhaustibility of the metastory (242-243).

Ricoeur identifies another difficulty neglected by overenthusiastic and uncritical proponents of narrative theology: “It is, to my mind, the decisive trait with which any narrative theology has to come to grips. No biblical narrative works merely as narrative. It receives not only its theological but even its original religious meaning from its *composition with other modes of discourse*” (245, emphasis in original). He points to the laws within the Torah, to prophecy, to the wisdom literature, and to the psalms as bodies of non-narrative scriptural discourse with which the narratives interact to reveal their religious significance.

Ricoeur considers the most critical issue unresolved in narrative theology to be “the *transition from narrative to explicit theological discourse*” (246, emphasis in original). He points to the non-narrative biblical discourse that co-exists with biblical narratives as already providing some of the mediating instruments that contribute to “the full *meaningfulness* of biblical narratives;” and he points also to the role of imagination combined with reason to begin to render intelligible the theology embedded in the narratives (246).

Anglican Views

Two writers from the Anglican tradition comment on the usefulness of narrative in “making sense of life” (Sykes 1985) and in suggesting “a new vocabulary of biblical authority” (Hargreaves 1996). Both add helpful nuance to our understanding of the possibilities of narrative theology.

Sykes warns of “the potential of a theology of story to sponsor an acute distortion of perspective, a radical misperception of the nature of the human condition, *and do so in the name of an intensely biblical spirituality*” (118-119, emphasis in original). He feels that the issue may be particularly urgent at a time characterized “by the advanced state of polarization between contemporary conservative forms of Christianity and the liberal establishment” (119). Such a misperception may take the form of self-deceit, which Sykes explores by considering Joseph Butler’s sermons on the subject. He calls Butler “a moral psychologist of insight and power” (120) and makes three observations on Butler’s homiletic reflections on self-deceit: (1) the stories of Balaam and David, on which Butler bases his sermons, “remind the Christian that religious persons can be both dishonest and oppressive, and without difficulty deploy well-known techniques for concealing the true nature of their activities from themselves” (120), and Sykes agrees with Stanley Hauerwas that proper casuistry requires that we check out ““our particular rendering of the story of God with that of our community”” (121); (2) how we check our rendering of the story of God in the contemporary age, though, can lead to “a morass of conflicting claims in psychological science” because “what is to be observed in the field of human behaviour appears to be dependent on what human beings are taught to see by theoreticians,” which then leads to “a more insidious and self-inclosing route into self-deception, precisely because of its claiming the prestige of science in replacement of the illusions of religion” (121). Finally, (3) Sykes reminds us of Butler’s belief in a final judgment, and of the effect that such a belief has on the meaning we make of our

humanity: “It is evident that the story of the last judgment plays a vital role in a human being’s capacity for construing the meaning of personal experience” (122).

Sykes recommends “Butler’s untidy empiricism” over “up-to-date psychological theory,” and as support points to the directness with which Nathan’s parable of the poor man’s ewe elicits David’s recognition of his own culpability. “No psychological theory is involved; Butler’s genius is to see that David’s state of mind is both plausible in itself and one to which we are all, to some degree and in some respects, prone” (121). Our capacity to account for “puzzling behaviour” may have been expanded somewhat by psychological theory, Sykes argues, but our “openness to moral conviction” stems not from these theories but from “our residual capacity to match our ambivalent behaviour with what is morally unambivalent, often recalled to mind in a story (myth, fable, or parable)” (121-122). Sykes reminds us of Butler’s belief in the final judgment, a teleological principle in which “the story of the last judgment plays a vital role in a human being’s capacity for construing the meaning of personal experience. . . . A narrative projection of one’s human history to the judgment seat of Christ is the form in which that person makes a rational evaluation of his or her present conduct” (122).

Sykes then moves on to explore the use of narrative to illuminate a corner of theology, in particular proposing the use of the “grammar of narrative, consisting of a setting, a theme, a plot and a resolution” as a way to go beyond the simplistic notion that “socialization in the Christian story is proof against folly and vice” (123). He reminds us that “telling the truth about human life involves a very complex process of experimentation with narrative, and that self-deceit is, at root, the provision of a false role

for oneself in the story by which one makes sense of one's life" (123). He discusses Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* to underscore "the falsity that attends a human being's endeavours to make sense of life," and concludes that

the reception and transmission of the Christian story will create both enlightenment and puzzlement. To live in the Christian pattern is to see one's life in a particular *context*, the dealings of God and humanity, given a particular *theme*, human redemption, set in a *plot*, the story of Christ and the church, and anticipating a *resolution*, namely the last judgment. . . . But at the point where the narrative of the Christian church interacts with my own experience there is necessary puzzlement because of its ultimately wordless quality. Here it is essential to the reception of the Christian story that the examples of religious self-deception be held in mind. For self-deception, as illuminated by Butler's untidy empiricism, is unwillingness to attend to human particularity. . . .

The role of story in theology is thus complex. If it gives meaning to a person's life, it should also bestow self-doubt. If it tends to promote self-deceit, the individual may need to be delivered—by story, on this occasion, that is, by particular human experience in narrative form, incorporating the unassimilable and tragic particularity of human need and interest. Or if the self-doubt which truly received story generates expands itself too far into moral ambivalence, the individual again may need deliverance—by story again, that is, the calm presentation of a morally unambiguous case, as in the case of Nathan (124-125).

With Sykes's contribution we have strayed into the area of narrative ethics—an topic that is certainly pertinent to narrative theology, but that is unfortunately being neglected in the present essay. We should note, however, what Sykes describes as the "wordless quality" of "the point where the narrative of the Christian church interacts with my own experience," as the modesty of this claim reminds us of Ricoeur when he refers to the point where "the character of the metastory as that which cannot be told joins the theological theme of God's ineffability."

Biblical authority, rather than biblical interpretation is the subject of Mark Hargreaves' essay (1996). He begins by noting the polarization of the debate on biblical authority, between those on the evangelical side who insist on the "inerrancy" and "infallibility" of scripture, and those Hargreaves describes as "functionalist." "If a

functionalist speaks of the authority of the Bible then the authority being discussed is the authority of the community which has adopted this book” (290). Hargreaves’ project is to find a vocabulary that will support a middle ground. He claims that both sides of the debate ignore “the nature of the text itself”—“complex, with many diverse literary genres” and one whose “most characteristic mode of writing is that of narrative” (290-291). He takes this observation as warrant that the new vocabulary he seeks should be taken from the language about narrative.

Hargreaves also understands the Bible not only to contain many stories, but to constitute a single story, “an overall, overarching narrative shape,” a proposition he feels he shares with Northrop Frye and the liberation theologians, and which, we have seen, is a view that Paul Ricoeur finds problematic. At this point, to base his discussion of narrative, Hargreaves refers to the writing of history. (Writers about narrative can be divided into those who take their cue from literary fiction and those who take their cue from the writing of history. Hargreaves uses history, with occasional forays into literary theory.) Here Hargreaves follows Ricoeur’s understanding, as developed in *Time and Narrative*, “that things are understood only as they are placed within the context of a narrative plot” (292). In this view, Hargreaves is also following the narrativist historiography of A. C. Danto and W. B. Gallie, and disparages those who “refuse to narrativize history” and cites as an example the work of Fernand Braudel, an exemplar of the French *Annales* school of history. Hargreaves, indeed, does not believe “the mere making of an annal” constitutes history. This argument had already been neatly contradicted by Hugh Scott, who cited Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance*

in Italy, and Huizinga's *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, two towering works of history that "do not depend on a story-model, that is, do not depend on our 'following' a self-explanatory story" (Scott 1976, 424). This is no mere quibble, for it goes to the very heart of what we mean by "understanding," and the circular reasoning of some proponents of narrative theology. Linguistic and even non-linguistic symbolic forms other than narrative can effect understanding (think of lyric poetry, statistics, economics, genetics, and even systematic theology!) We may argue that some of these do not yield understanding of what is truly human, much less what is of God—but then we would need to argue what indeed is "the truly human," as we argue (always) about what is of God. Hargreaves goes on to approve of Alasdair MacIntyre's argument that even science "has a 'narrative rationality'" when it is obvious that the use of narrative in this context is simply a fashionable substitution of a literary word for "paradigm" or "theory," the words more likely to be used in scientific discourse.

Hargreaves does not need these overstatements to support his next point, which is that "Christianity is also something 'narratively understood'" (292). He finds the Christian story encapsulated in the creeds. The creeds provide evidence that the Bible satisfies the minimum criteria of having a beginning, middle, and end that qualify it as a single narrative; he therefore sees that viewing the Bible as a single overarching narrative is not imposing an artificial unity where none exists. He addresses another objection to seeing the Bible as primarily narrative by acknowledging the presence of other literary genres, but argues

that narrative is privileged. I want to emphasise that the narrative of the Bible provides the structure within which the other genre [sic] take meaning. Narrative dominates the

other genre [sic], and to this extent it is therefore to be privileged. These genres [sic] are dependent on narrative in ways that narrative is not dependent on them (293).

Here also, he takes an important departure from the thinking of Ricoeur, with regard to the relationship between narrative and non-narrative scriptural discourse. He bases his argument on the perception that the non-narrative texts—for example, the laws—are placed within a narrative context—for example, in the mouth of Moses, in the context of the Israelites wandering in Sinai (293). These arguments strike me as unconvincing, and provide a less insightful framework than Ricoeur's for allowing the various kinds of discourse in the Bible to inform each other in truly dialogic and mutual ways.

Hargreaves then turns to plot and theme—vocabulary borrowed from the language of narrative—to construct a view of biblical authority. In this he takes up the defense of these traditional notions of narratology against postmodern attacks—by writers of plotless novels such as Vonnegut and Grass, and structuralists and deconstructionists who denigrate the concept of theme. “Plots work to humanize time,” Hargreaves says.

Plot is the knowing of the destination. . . . A plot provides the final end that all parts of the narrative are to serve. . . . If the Bible organises the whole of human time, then it follows that we must be located somewhere within its bounds. . . . By locating themselves within the bounds of this plot, Christians imbue their actions with meaning. . . . The literary shape of the Bible as emplotted narrative organises historical time into a meaningful whole. . . . Christians continue to tell the story of their own lives, and the story of their communities, within the bounds of the biblical narrative. . . . This plot imbues life with meaning and must therefore be a crucial element in the vocabulary of biblical authority (295-296).

If Hargreaves is overambitious in his claims for plot, he is somewhat more careful in his handling of theme, and states more modestly that “the study of theme is . . . a study of where a narrative may speak of truth. . . . Themes help to articulate the claim that the

biblical narrative is true” (297). While I would not dream of taking up the cause of the structuralists and deconstructionists he proceeds to dispute, I will mention that his faith in the revelatory power of theme misses two simple questions. The first asks who is identifying the theme, and from what point of historical, geographical, linguistic, and social difference from the location of the text is this identification being made? This question arises when he quotes Monroe Beardsley’s statement of the theme of *Wuthering Heights* as the “quest for spiritual contentment through harmony with both good and evil forces of nature” (300). Many other characterizations of the theme of this romantic novel could be identified with equal justice, and an interesting discussion could arise as to which thematic statement gets closest to the heart of the novel—a discussion I hope is happening still in British and American classrooms today. This brings me to the second question that Hargreaves fails to address: if themes are somehow to help us articulate the truth claims of a narrative, how are we to determine the truth value of different statements of the theme? What are the rules of engagement for that discussion?

In next turning his attention to liberationist readings of the Bible, Hargreaves acknowledges that “Christian readers, in different contexts, offer divergent readings of the same biblical text.” He offers a lucid account of the creativity and faithfulness with which liberation theologians read the Bible; they “maintain the balance between the importance of the reader’s historical contexts in interpretation and a commitment to the idea that the Bible can still address and challenge that context” (304).

From his discussion, he offers four implications of his project: (1) The type of authority we grant a narrative is different from that we expect of a textbook.

Christians are required to journey with the Bible, to allow this text to mould them and speak to them in whatever situation they find themselves. . . . The authority of the Bible is not a static concept. It should reflect the fact that there is no end to the telling of the Bible's story (305).

This accords with “the way that God exercises authority in the Bible. God does not cling to authority; it is shared. God does not impose authority; others are invited to partake of it” (305-306). (2) This view of authority is thus flexible—“it does not demand that the Bible says one thing to all people. It allows for the fact that the Bible is a dynamic book” (306). (3) Those who expound the Bible, whether they be preachers or biblical critics, need to attend “to the narrative structure of the biblical text. . . . Too often passages are isolated from the Bible's narrative framework and their themes are ignored” (306). (4) Hargreaves final plea is that “the Bible must be reclaimed by the Church as ‘our book’. Modern scholarship, insensitive to the biblical narrative, has served to distance the Church from the Bible. It has missed the integrative ability of the Bible's plot. . . . Christians should be encouraged to ‘enter into’ the Bible” (307).

True to their Anglican perspectives, both Sykes and Hargreaves attempt to walk the *via media* in what they both consider to be polarized times. Sykes asks that we guard against self-deceit and recommends a hermeneutic of *self-suspicion*, a strong dose of self-doubt, and a healthy respect for the complexity of our human stories as we seek to find ourselves in the Christian story. Hargreaves, while perhaps overstating the claims of narrative in our engagement with biblical texts, encourages us to attend to their important narrative elements as a means of arriving at a more flexible view of biblical authority. Both sets of recommendations may offer insight and support to the pastor who wishes to provide attentive, respectful, sensitive, and scripturally based care.

An Asian Voice: C. S. Song

Narrative theology is a key procedure in the work of the Chinese theologian C. S. Song. This is reflected throughout his writings and most prominently, perhaps, in the subtitles of two of his major books: *Tell Us Our Names: Story Theology from an Asian Perspective* and *The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology* (Song 1984, 1999). An overview of Song's thoughts on narrative theology is not possible here, and is available elsewhere (Chan 1998). I will only attempt to describe selected insights related to the present project

In Song's theology are combined the two themes we have been looking at separately: narrative as the primary mode of apprehending human experience and narrative as a dominant mode in scripture. What becomes apparent, however, is that God's Word, God's story, arises not solely out of the latter, and certainly not exclusively out of a Christian framework. For Song, stories represent the experience both of individuals and of peoples. He is particularly concerned with the experience of the peoples of Asia, whose history and traditions have long existed outside the boundaries of Western Christian history. Song persistently advocates that stories outside the Christian tradition, in particular the stories of Asia, are, no less than the stories of the West, stories of the presence of God in the world: "To know Jesus, to understand what he said and did, to experience his suffering, to fathom the redemptive meaning of his death, we also need to listen to those stories lived, experienced, and told by our fellow Asians, those men, women, and children in Asia who remain outside the Christian Church. We do not just

listen to them. We must hear in them how God is speaking to us Christians” (Song 1999b, 16).

Theology in Asia can no longer be a repetition of what we have inherited. To explore the ways of God that are not comprehended by traditional Christianity, we need to read the Bible with new eyes and fresh perspectives. We must equip ourselves to tell Asian stories as stories of God with Asians involved. We have to assume theological responsibility for ourselves, believing that God has always had other plans for Asia and means to implement these plans that go beyond the experience and knowledge of Western Christians and churches (Song 1999a, 57).

He warns us about taking the “world constructed by the Christian church” as the only world with which God is concerned. He says plainly that “our [Christian] faith and theology have prepared us for the world the Christian church has constructed, but not for the world God has created” (Song 1999a, 66). He constantly sets the world of “stories of people—their myths, legends, folktales, and real-life stories” against the pursuit of a theology made up of concepts, doctrines, and propositions, and in so doing urges us “to cultivate the theological imagination that can help us image God and perceive God’s activity in the stories” (67).

What takes place in the theological process described is a conversation between the story of Jesus and the stories of people expanding to God’s creation. It is not a leisurely conversation over a cup of tea. It is not a theological debate over imaginary theological issues. And it is not an exercise to prove who is right. Yes, it is a *theological* conversation, but the conversation is theological because it relates to God as well as humanity, because God is called upon to bear witness to what has been going on in the universe and in our world—the world in which human beings struggle for hope in the face of hopelessness and for the meaning of life, always overshadowed by death (68).

Song is not simply a purveyor of powerful personal stories. He argues eloquently that personal stories take place in the context of historical forces and real-life, economic contexts. He moves fluidly from the stories of oppressed individuals, to oppressed peoples, to clearly described analyses of oppressive economic systems (cf. Song 1999,

140, 167). These analyses are not in themselves stories, but they are important aspects of human experience, necessary context for the right understanding of human stories. In providing these backdrops, Song offers a needed corrective to those, such as Crites and his followers, who would place an excessive or even exclusive burden on narrative as the primary shape of experience itself.

In relying as heavily as he does on narrative to do his theology, Song recognizes the power in the stories of obscure people, and he is a sensitive interpreter of stories that we all think we know. He tells the stories of migrant workers from the Philippines, and crippled slum dwellers in India. He wonders at length how Jesus must have heard the story of the slaughter of Egyptian innocents that immediately preceded the exodus of God's chosen people, and how we must hear it carefully, too, instead of glossing over the horror, as we have been wont to do in our eagerness to celebrate the triumph of Hebrew liberation.

Song is also aware of both narrative time and historical time, and one of his most powerful theological insights is to locate hope in both kinds of time. He argues that hope, as Christians understand it has too often been detached from the historical and narrative present:

In Christianity the tendency is to dehistoricize hope, to unhinge it from the course of real life and to remove it from the happenings in the world. Hope gets disconnected from our living experiences and disjointed from the daily experiences of others. . . . In faith and in theology we speak of hope in the future—a future with no deadline, a future at the end of time, a future in which hope is to come true. This is what is called 'eschatological hope' in Christian theology. But is not 'eschatological hope' a hope eternally postponed? Is it not a hope that forever eludes our grasp? (Song 1999a, 134).

As Song emphasizes, “For hope to be hope, it has to address the present as well as the future, perhaps the present more than the future” (Song 1999a, 163). Like others have said of love, Song finds that hope as preached from the Christian pulpit can too often become an empty generality. Without a direct connection to human action—in other words, without being grounded in ethics—hope is only “meagerly related to life.”

The ethical power of hope empowers us to reconstruct lives ruined by hatred, greed and violence. That ethical power also allows us not to become cynical about or resigned to the powers of evil. It strengthens our faith in God who, as the very source of our faith, is much closer to us than we are to ourselves. Hope is not just power. It is *ethical* power, power to change the situations that degrade persons and corrupt human community (Song 1999a, 163).

Song’s placement of hope not just in the eschatological future but in the actual lived present of historically situated human beings has obvious implications for pastoral ministry, and provides an urgent reminder on how the narratives of both human beings and of God need to be interpreted not just in relation to some moment outside of time, but in relation also to the reign of God as it might be, if not fully realized, then at least passionately imagined here on earth.

Though Song’s concepts are rooted in his Asian and Asian-American context, I would contend that they have broader applicability, and not just in the interests of ecumenism. Having stories told across cultures, and seeing the workings of God in every human’s story and in every culture should become for every pastor a basic theological tool, especially in a society as multicultural as the United States. How will it be possible, for example, for the Episcopal Church U.S.A. to begin to achieve its ambitious goals of evangelism, if, in addition to inviting people into the community of God we also require that they become ersatz Englishmen? Where are new Episcopalians to come from in such

numbers if not in part from populations, like the Asians described by Song, whose historical and cultural development have taken place outside the geographic, cultural, and psychic boundaries of Christian West? If we are not to repeat the failed missionary project of nineteenth- and twentieth-century cultural imperialism, we must approach evangelism with a new theology—one based not in doctrines and concepts that, despite the appearance of “scientific” and theological objectivity, are culturally embedded in the particular history of the Euro-American West, but based in the living contemporary narratives of people as they are today, embedded in a bewildering array of historical and cultural contexts. If the reign of God is to heal the whole world, God’s story must be told—faithfully, sensitively, flexibly and not coercively—in every language of the world.

Connecting the Stories

How do we begin to connect our human stories, the stories of our experience, with the story from scripture? Robert McAfee Brown engagingly examines “ways in which we can enter into stories other than our own.” Although he innocently starts out talking about “our stories” and “other stories,” he is really interested in looking at the connections between our story and “the Israel story and the Christian story (which for shorthand purposes I shall hereafter refer to simply as ‘The Story’)” (Brown 1975, 166).

Brown identifies five ways: (1) We compare different stories, both the many stories we generate as our own, and the stories of others, seeing them in constant relation to each other. Among these stories, we accord to one or several a normative authority. We can choose, for instance, as Brown does, to make “The Story” the normative story to

which all our other personal stories are subordinated. This normative authority can be challenged, however, by the other stories with which we allow it to interact. By allowing these challenges we can be made to see how we might, for instance, be intermingling “The Story” with our American, or Western, or white stories in uncritical and oppressive ways.

(2) “‘The Story’ may become my story by *being re-told to me or by me*, in various ways” (169). Here Brown uses several examples from Elie Wiesel to show how re-telling of “The Story” by others can begin to make it our own.

(3) “I can also relate my story to ‘The Story’ by *watching how others of my contemporaries do so*” (170). Wiesel is again used as an example, but so too are the liberation theologians, who suggest in their contemporary retellings that the “white northerner” might not show to great advantage in how “The Story” is to be understood.

(4) “‘The Story’ can become our story . . . as we enter into it by *re-enacting it ourselves*” (171). This is done most obviously through liturgy.

(5) “Finally, what may happen is that hearing another story can force us to tell our own story in a different way, transformed to such a degree that we can properly call the experience one of *conversion*” (172). In other words, “The Story” connects with us not because it echoes some aspect of our own experience, but because our own experience changes course, is converted, through its transforming and instructive power (all emphases are in the original).

With a deceptively conversational tone and virtually no recourse to literary-critical, historiographical, or postmodern theory, Brown offers a persuasive and usable

framework for considering how the narrative of human experience and the narrative of scriptural theology can be linked in the practice of pastoral care. Together with the work of C. S. Song, his insights and example can provide the pastor with concrete guidance on doing the work of theology—apprehending the reality of God—through the use of narrative. Further explorations on how “our story” might connect to “The Story” are presented in the next two chapters.

Chapter Two

NARRATIVE THEOLOGY AND PASTORAL COUNSELING

There are many uses of narrative theology in the practice of pastoral ministry.

Those related to scriptural exegesis may be too obvious to require cataloging here. Those related to the telling of personal stories are also varied, and range from the use of stories in preaching, to forming a framework for religious education, to their use in Bible study and support groups (Fackre 1983, 349). Specific examples and guidance for using story in growth groups, and an explication of the pastor's role as a "story guide" are provided by Wimberly (1998) and are discussed in further detail below. This chapter will focus on the use of narrative in pastoral counseling, and will attempt to discover what theological roles and resources the use of narrative can suggest for pastoral practice.

Presentations of a Narrative Approach to Pastoral Counseling

Philip Culbertson, in his textbook on pastoral counseling, offers narrative counseling theory as one of three theoretical foundations (along with family systems theory and object relations theory) for his presentation of counseling from a Christian perspective. He begins by noticing the importance of story in Christian faith, teaching, evangelism, and liturgy. He then gives an unfortunately mangled historical overview of

the value of stories in literary tradition.* He notices that stories can generate multiple versions of themselves and multiple meanings, and concludes with “one of the most basic theories of narrative psychology: that the meaning of any utterance is in what is heard—or in the response that the utterance generates—and not within the intentions of the author or storyteller from whom the utterance originates. No matter how clear or well-intentioned, neither the storyteller nor the preacher has any control over what is heard, and what is heard is, bottom line, the truest meaning” (Culbertson 2000, 49).

Culbertson spends the bulk of his chapter on discussing the three classes of stories “that shape human identity”: Family Narratives, in which families tell about their past, themselves, and the individual; Self-Identifying Narratives, which individuals tell to reflect their self-understanding and the events of their lifetime; and Intersubjective Narratives, “the stories and scripts we silently construct and rehearse in our heads all day long” (49).

Family narratives include healthy and unhealthy stories. Healthy stories provide shared meaning, define boundaries, create equilibrium through the articulation of values, beliefs, and the connections with familial and cultural history. Though they may contain

* Aside from placing Sir Philip Sidney (misspelled by Culbertson) “in the last century” (Culbertson’s book is copyright 2000, while Sidney was a contemporary of Shakespeare) he betrays that he must be appropriating this overview from a secondary source and not from a primary knowledge of the English literary tradition when he states that “in the nineteenth century, poet Percy Bysshe Shelley understood stories to be a record of the best and happiest moments of the best and happiest minds” (Culbertson 2000, 45). In fact, what Shelley said in his work *A Defence of Poetry*, is that “*poetry* is the record of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds” (in Perkins, D. ed., 1967. *English Romantic Writers*. New York: Harcourt Brace, p. 1085; emphasis added). Indeed, as one would expect of a Romantic poet, Shelley disparages story in relation to poetry: “A poem is the very image of life expressed in its eternal truth. There is this difference between a story and a poem, that a story is a catalogue of detached facts, which have no other connection than time, place, circumstance, cause and effect. . . . A story of particular facts is as a mirror which obscures and distorts that which should be beautiful: poetry is a mirror which makes beautiful that which is distorted” (*ibid*, 1075). It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss whether, in his exuberant exaltation of poetry, Shelley was being fair to the power of story.

elements of fantasy, they are generally “rooted in a traceable historical accuracy.”

Unhealthy stories, also referred to as “family myths,” are taken as reality by the family (even when they do not accord with historical fact), define each person’s role and the family’s expectations for success or failure, avoid conflict by clarifying authority structures and rules, and provide explanations for family dysfunction. Families constitute interpretive communities for the stories they generate, monitoring any threatening deviations from established norms (Culbertson 2000, 50-52).

Culbertson provides some useful taxonomies of the types of family narratives. He discusses the connections between family secrets (for instance, childhood trauma), the untrue stories created to explain away the secret, and the negative effects that the resultant cognitive dissonance will engender. He provides a taxonomy of family scripts, the enacted dramas by which families play out their narratives with predictable results, and shows how narrative counseling theory overlaps with family systems theory in highlighting the concept of family roles. Finally, he offers a useful discussion of how the pastoral counselor can help reshape family scripts through breaking them down into their component parts; reediting the script, particularly through the encouragement of improvised innovations on the established script; and observing reactions to the script by outsiders such as a new spouse (56-58).

Culbertson discusses self-defining narratives as those we begin to tell on our own about ourselves, as we begin to grow beyond the stories that we are born into, the stories told to us about ourselves by our families. “The will to individuation marks the transition from the absolute determinism of the self as the product of others’ words to assuming

mastery over one's own identity" (59). How we construct these self-defining narratives will be influenced by the narratives our families have already told us and by our culture. We construct these narratives selectively, usually with ourselves at the center, usually with ourselves as efficacious agents, and usually with ourselves as responsible for the desired outcomes and not responsible for undesired outcomes (60). A seven-step framework whereby the counselor can assist a person to construct a personal narrative ("framing") is presented, followed by therapeutic techniques for reinterpretation of the narrative ("reframing") to help achieve revised understandings, new meanings, and new perspectives on old or existing problems (60-66).

Culbertson's discussion of intersubjective narratives explores the view that each individual is a collection of selves, offering a variety of possible behaviors and reactions to the events of our life story. With each of these different selves, different sets of possibilities can be considered, different alternatives to action can be "tried on" as the self decides how to advance the plot of the narrative to achieve desired ends (66-68).

The therapeutic aim of exploring family, individual, and intersubjective narratives is to achieve consistency and integration.

From the point of view of narrative psychology, we might then say that those who present for counseling do so because their narratives do not match either their affective or their lived experience, or because there are significant aspects of their emotional or behavioral history that contradict the dominant narrative they are attempting to maintain. The diagnosis, therefore, might be termed 'narrative dissonance,' a condition parallel to cognitive dissonance (Culbertson 2000, 68).

The pastoral counselor may find that many cultures value storytelling, and that this mode of counseling can work well across cultures and across genders. Caution is offered, however, to note how basic values—such as healthy development and maturity—may

differ from one culture to another, and thus fundamentally affect the interpretation of stories by the storyteller and the counselor. Culbertson ends this chapter on narrative counseling theory by noting again the importance of narrative in both Christian and Jewish traditions, and suggests that in the effort to construct coherent and integrated personal narratives in adulthood, by creating a self “that is whole and purposeful because it is embedded in a coherent and meaningful story” we are not engaging in “an act of narcissism, but an *imitatio dei*” (70). In my view he either misses or ducks the question about whether and how a person’s narrative(s) are consonant or dissonant not just with his or her lived experience, but also with his or her understanding of God’s narrative. As pastors we can thus seek to explore whether the connection between narrative counseling on the one hand and spiritual concerns and knowledge of God on the other is not one of mere analogy or imitation, but an actual engagement of one set of narratives with the other.

More significantly, Culbertson falls into a trap of what I would like to call “the myth of Edenic integrity.” In a recent essay, Henry Louis Gates reflects on the condition described by W. E. B. Du Bois as “double consciousness,” referring to the “fractured psyche” of the American Negro at the turn of the twentieth century (Gates 2003). This double consciousness incorporates both the black person’s view of the self through the eyes of oppressive white culture and also the person’s own lived experience of oppression and degradation. Gates sketches the roots of Du Bois’s concept in the Hegelian master-slave dialectic and Emersonian philosophy, and in the psychological formulations of Alfred Binet and William James, while making it clear that Du Bois is

referring to the particular situation of African-Americans. More broadly, I would contend, we can track formulations that are analogous to Du Bois's in existential alienation, in T. S. Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility," or in any number of psychological, cultural, political, philosophical, and theological discourses on integration vs. fragmentation, diversity vs. unity, federation vs. balkanization. Gates observes that the double consciousness Du Bois attached to the condition of the American Negro "for subsequent generations of writers . . . was taken to be the defining condition of modernity itself." With postmodern panache, Gates declares that "Today, the ideal of wholeness has largely been retired. And cultural multiplicity is no longer seen as the problem, but as a solution—a solution to the confines of identity itself. Double consciousness, once a disorder, is now a cure."

As I said out the outset of this essay, I am only a reluctant postmodern, and so, while I would like to consider that there was perhaps never a historical or even mythical time when human consciousness was unitary and whole—which is why Eden is a myth—I am not so sure that we can give up as easily as Gates seems to the striving toward a kind of psychic and spiritual integration—which is why the Edenic myth continues to haunt us. The problem, however, of a paradigm that locates integrity and wholeness in some personal-family or cultural-historical past is that it leads us to believe, perhaps influenced by Freudian discourse, that recognizing the moment of the "fall" and somehow undoing it will bring us "back" to wholeness. It may in fact be the case instead that integrity and wholeness are not there to be recaptured, nor (if I correctly understand Gates's optimism and may be permitted to disagree with it) to be discarded entirely, but qualities to be

created anew, from the fragments and shards, the double and triple and quadruple consciousnesses that are the necessary inheritance of all human beings—immigrant and native, dominant culture and minority, First World and Two-Thirds World, male and female, and so forth.

To take the discussion back to Culbertson and narrative counseling, and to absorb the influence of Gates's insight: what Culbertson calls "narrative dissonance" may be not so much a diagnosis as a universal condition. My personal narrative may never square entirely with those of my parents or of my elder siblings, for as much as we traveled a road together as a family, we did not face the same historical, political, and personal realities as individuals. To reconcile our stories therapeutically may require adjustments on all sides, not just on my own. Much less might my story be consistent with those of other cultures and genders with whom I share the same historical space and time. Resolving narrative dissonance, whether on a personal therapeutic level or on a cultural-existential level, may be less a matter of recapturing an Edenic past or undoing a fall from grace—for as Crites reminds us, narrative time does not in fact allow us to change the past—and more a matter of creative engagement with the present and future that still allows us to acknowledge the past and incorporate the past as it enables us and gives us agency.

It is the hope held out by God's narrative that our own narratives might achieve not absolute unity and integration, but a kind of dialogic resonance and creative sympathy with the narratives of others within the capacious generosity of God's narrative. To effect this, however, we may need to remember the modesty of Ricoeur's sense of "the

inexhaustibility of the metastory;” Sykes’s sense of self-doubt and his skepticism of the universal claims of psychological science; Hargreaves’ flexibility in seeing God’s story in scripture; and Song’s creativity in allowing the playful dialog of God’s story with stories that lie firmly outside the Western Christian tradition.

Compared with Culbertson, Charles Gerkin provides a more nuanced and synthesized theory of narrative counseling—or, as he prefers to call it, a hermeneutical approach to pastoral counseling (1984, 1997). He blends a spectrum of insights from psychodynamic thought with a theological perspective.

The life of the soul is a continuous life of interpretation: a life of attaching meanings to behavior, relationships, the self’s maintenance of its line of life, and the intimations of the recurrent conflicts of ego that press upon the soul’s struggle with existence. By its hermeneutical, interpretive process, the life of the soul holds together in a dynamic tension a virtual myriad of often conflicting demands, expectations, drives and desires, emotions, relational commitments, meanings and values, perceptual patterns and ways of seeing the world.

I have called this central interpretive process by the dual title ‘the hermeneutics of the self in the life of the soul’ primarily to indicate two things—one psychological, the other theological. From a psychological perspective, taking my original cue from Boisen, I locate the central problem of the self in its hermeneutical process: the connection of experience with ideas and symbols. From a theological perspective I affirm that the life of the soul does not have to do with some isolated ‘spiritual’ relationship to God separate from the life of the self in the world. Rather, the life of the soul in relation to God is part and parcel with the life of the self in all its relationships, its struggle to find integrity at the connecting nexus of a confluence of forces and meanings. This view of the life of the soul assumes a God who is active in the world, incarnate in created life, and purposeful in history (Gerkin 1984, 104-105).

Gerkin approaches the understanding of the life of the soul using three dynamic postulates. First, the soul’s hermeneutical and formational task is dialectic, holding in tension input from the self/ego, the social situation, and the interpretations of faith and culture. Each of these forces also interacts with the others, creating a dynamic swirl of forces that envelop and influence the soul. Second, the life of the soul takes place in

relation to three dimensions of time: the lifespan of a single human life cycle, the extension of human history, and, within a Christian context, the eschatological time encompassing God's relationship with creation. Third, the self's hermeneutics, the process by which the self interprets life, is essentially narrative (Gerkin 1984, 100-117). In my view, this last postulate is a more modest and more accurate claim than to say that human experience itself is essentially narrative, as many of the proponents of narrative theology have commonly stated (see Chapter 1, above). It does not presume to characterize the essential nature of experience or reality, but merely attempts to describe the manner in which we come to understand that essential nature.

In his textbook on pastoral care, Gerkin provides a readable history of pastoral care from the beginnings of Christian history, and reaches even further back to Old Testament models. Particularly useful is his discussion of the twentieth century, from the thinking about the psychology of religion at the end of the nineteenth century through the psychodynamic models that dominated much of the century following. In proposing a narrative hermeneutical model Gerkin does not reject the insights of classical psychology, but incorporates them into a model that, in my view, moves away from the pathologizing impulse of the more traditional modes. Regarding the individual's narrative as a documentary and interpretive work with its own integrity, rather than as simply a mine to explore for symptoms, is a more faithful pastoral response to a host of situations that in fact are not pathological even when they are deeply distressing. It allows room also for ethical as well as theological reflection, brings into relief questions of divergent values

and cultural beliefs, and forces the pastor to confront “the problems of pluralism and relativism in contemporary society” (Gerkin 1997, 147).

Subroles of Pastoral Counseling

Counseling is one of the many roles of the pastor. The power of narrative can play an important part in fulfilling that role, although this power need not be dependent on the sometimes excessive claims made on behalf of narrative such as the following:

Our need for meaning originally expresses itself in the narrative mode. Storytelling implies an intelligible, coherent, and meaningful existence. Stories of God affirm the conviction that order prevails over chaos and that reality is intelligible. The world is, in the end, understandable; the absurd does not have the final say. . . .

Reality is story. Reality cannot be reduced to a concept or thing; reality is dynamic. This includes drastic changes in being and irreversible movements in time. Reality encompasses trivial and magnificent stupidities, comical and tragic disparities, and mysteries beyond solution. Reality, that plot with a meaningful conclusion, is usually full of surprises and mystery (Eberhardt 1996, 24).

Although Eberhardt goes on to provide valuable guidance for the telling of and listening to stories, the passage cited is the kind of overstatement unfortunately characteristic of some of the writing on narrative in relation to theology and pastoral care. One wonders whether someone who writes that “stories of God affirm the conviction that order prevails over chaos and that reality is intelligible” could ever have read the Book of Job, attempted to reconcile the commentary of the Hebrew prophets with the actual lived history of Israel, or reflected deeply enough on the passion of Christ; one wonders why the internal contradiction of saying that “reality is intelligible” on the one hand and “full of surprises and mystery” on the other has escaped his notice. If the history of the novel since Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and William Faulkner tells us anything at all, it tells us that both plots and meaningful conclusions are difficult

to come by in the modern and postmodern world, and at the very least will require a hermeneutic of such complexity, irony, suspicion, and comprehensiveness as are not likely to be found in pastoral encounters, nor accommodated in the abbreviated pastoral visit that is the norm in church ministry today.

We mustn't let such overexuberant claims for narrative deter us, however, from discovering the utility of narrative for pastoral counseling. Within the context of narrative theology we can perhaps identify subroles of the pastoral counselor, three of which may be witness, story guide, and theologian.

The pastor as witness

Using scriptural warrant, Nigel Robb proposes the figure of the witness as a model for pastoral care and counseling, and, building on his understanding of Paul Ricoeur, he identifies four aspects of the pastoral caregiver as witness:

(1) Pastoral caregivers are called (i.e., not volunteered), and they present themselves with gifts appropriate to the task of witness.

(2) Pastoral caregivers assist "in the relationship as the servant of God." Eschewing the role of "amateur psychologist or sociologist, . . . he or she is called by God to bear witness to the pain of the person and the hope found in God that there may be some meaning or light or release discovered. Yet the witness is a person who is honest and open, refusing to take the option of Job's comforters when the sufferer experiences the absence of God."

(3) Pastoral caregivers attempt to give meaning, or “to find some structure in which a problem or crisis may be expressed which does not deny the reality of the problem, nor abdicate belief in the concern and care of a loving God.” As witness, the pastoral caregiver affirms the reality of the pain of the sufferer.

(4) Pastoral caregivers’ own lives are affected by the precepts according to which they give counsel, thus laying “firm obligations of spiritual discipline and devotion on the caregiver” (Robb 1993, 4).

The pastoral caregiver as witness uses “reflective listening skills” and demonstrates “empathy and understanding.” Truth-telling is an important quality: “we are to be honest and courageous enough to point out the inconsistencies, the invalid assumptions, confusions and complexities which obscure the person’s perceptions.” Note the similarity of this instruction to Sykes’s recommending of self-doubt to combat self-deceit (see Chapter 1). For the person receiving care, the purpose of the pastor as witness “is to aid the development of a realistic view of themselves and others, and an acceptance of the present situation so that they can function appropriately and still have long term goals and visions” (Robb 1993, 5-6).

As witnesses pastors will guard against the temptation to assert that empathizing with the other implies that they experience the actual pain of the suffering person. As true witnesses, the pastor is simply “called to watch.” Watching and witnessing may allow the pastor to assist in searching out meaning with the sufferer; witness as a pastoral response does not “explain suffering, just as Jesus Christ never explained it, but it needs to attempt to show how it might be lived and grown through.” As witnesses, pastors seek

to “reframe” the experience of the sufferer—again, without denying the reality or complexity of the suffering (Robb 1993, 6-7).

Finally, the pastor as witness will accept a role as advocate, the “public role in questioning the moral, ethical or legal systems which in his or her experience, inflict pain and unnecessary suffering on others” (Robb 1993, 8). While being sensitive to the individual pain of the sufferer, the pastor as witness can help her or him see the experience in the larger perspective of systemic forces, whether they be just or unjust, nurturing or neglectful.

The pastor as story guide

As noted above, Culbertson provides a seven-step process for the pastor to assist the individual in framing a personal narrative and in reframing various reinterpretations and revisions (Culbertson 2000, 60-65). Capps (2001) elaborates a story model in contradistinction to the prevailing systems model for family therapy to raise up the importance of self-determination and self-differentiation of the individual over against the equilibrium of the family system. He emphasizes the minister’s role as an interpreter of the story of the person seeking counseling, and likens this activity to what happens in an adult Bible study group. “The minister and the other person form an interpretive community as they give attention to bringing out the meaning of this person’s story” (Capps 2001, 188).

Wimberly (1998) has also provided a framework for the pastor to use narrative as a guide toward personhood, and sees the role of the pastor—“or what the writer calls the

minister as ‘story guide’”—as “helping others to visualize their hope” (233). The pastor will first take note of the six components that Wimberly identifies as narrative content: (1) self identity, or clues to the person’s self-perception; (2) social contexts, or where the person is located in the larger society and how she or he experiences it; (3) interpersonal relationships, including family members, friends, and others in community, work, church, school, and other settings; (4) life events, both positive and negative, arising out the various social contexts and interpersonal relationships in the individual’s life, and including those that are cause for celebration and those that bring hardship, suffering, or grief; (5) life meanings, or the significance that the individual attributes to events, people, and themes in their lives, and the questions he or she has about life’s direction and purpose; and (6) story plot, or how the individual chooses to act over time, reflecting (or not) the basic themes that run through the narrative.

Wimberly proposes

that we see faith issues as an integral part of our examination of the content of narratives and as part of any process for guiding hopeful stories. . . . It is important to give credence to religious meanings intertwined in personal narratives. This emphasis is also important when we are dealing with a process focused on hope because hoping, at its core, is deeply theological (254).

For work with what she calls “growth groups,” Wimberly articulates a four-phase process of “story-linking,” each phase consisting of several specific activities. Participants are invited to link their stories with a particular Bible story or text, and of particular note are the points where participants are asked, “Where is God at work in your life?” and where “they anticipate their own ongoing response to God” (256).

Eberhardt, whom I criticized earlier, does provide useful advice in the telling of and listening to stories. First, he counsels us to attend to the power of language and the texture of words to transform the human heart. Next, he recommends skillful listening, through which we integrate the stories we hear into our own story and by which we convey a sense of presence to the storyteller. Thirdly, he warns us not to moralize, and to allow the multiplicity of meanings that a story can generate. Finally, he advises us to attend to the attitude of the teller and reminds us that “quality storytelling demands integrity, trust, and vision” (Eberhardt 1996, 28-29).

The pastor as theologian

In and amidst the programmatic activity of pastoral ministry, as Michael Purcell argues in “Pastoral Ministry as Theology” (1995), we need to clear spaces “within which theology can emerge,” for “pastoral ministry opens on to theology, and theology draws its inspiration from the pastoral life of the Church.” These spaces are the silences in which we can be attentive “to the voice of God as it always and already speaks to us in the lives of God’s people” (16-17).

Purcell draws on the existentialism of Heidegger, the liberation theology of Boff, and the cultural critique of Gramsci to indicate how the practicing pastor (1) listens for the “life of God in his people” breaking into the life of the Church; (2) responds to the grace of this in-breaking by allowing theology to arise reflectively out of praxis; and (3) acts as the organic intellectual who does not call the people to an orthodoxy of belief faithful to scripture and tradition, but who rather assists the people in recognizing “that

tradition itself is organic and continuing, and that God still speaks in the lives of his people” (21). “Theology,” Purcells says, “happens in the life of a community which experiences the Lord in its midst. . . .”

If the ‘joys and hopes of people in every age’ are also the joys and hopes of the Church through which the Lord speaks, those intimately involved in pastoral service in the Church and who co-experience those joys and hopes are well placed to offer theological service to the Church as they reflect theologically upon those experiences. . . . As pastors . . . we try to explain what has happened and what is happening in life to those to whom we minister, to ourselves, to the wider community of the parish . . . and maybe beyond. We are already organic intellectuals” (21).

The practicing pastor, then, is a practicing, constructive theologian, and not merely a purveyor of theology that has been absorbed in seminary. We strive to see the face of God in every suffering person we meet, and to see the story of God in every person’s story, and in the end, perhaps, our striving makes it so: these human stories are God’s unfolding story, and we are called to enter into them in the compassionate, Christ-like ways that God has described for us. Krug (1999) offers some down-to-earth examples of how we can read our story into God’s story, and God’s story into ours. Lynch and Willows debate whether the theological task “is to make God’s story fit with the story of our lives” or “to find ourselves narrated into God’s story” (Lynch and Willows 1998, 23). However we as pastors understand which story comes first—and there are undoubtedly traps in both understandings—hearing the human stories of our parishioners can help us to develop our anthropology along with our theology. For, I would contend, if the central historical fact of our faith is the incarnation, the injection of God into human history by Godself becoming human, then, in addition to a developing theology, in addition to continually imagining who God is, we need also a developing anthropology. We need to

work continually on our idea of what being human is. Only then are we working toward a theology of the incarnation in all its fullness.

Applications of Narrative Counseling in Pastoral Care

Several applications of narrative approaches to pastoral situations have been reported in the literature. The following examples address specific populations and issues that will be of concern to ministry across a variety of settings.

- Children and adolescents with severe behavioral or emotional disorders in a hospital setting offer an opportunity to explore the importance of stories in the act of caring (Webb-Mitchell 1995). Stories allow pastors a more complete view of the person, and thus to treat the whole child and not just the condition. It is important for pastors to develop an awareness of one's own stories, "how our individual narrative influences and shapes our world view, our understanding of the human condition, and how we hear, interpret, and respond to the narratives of others" (224). Theologically, the pastoral caregiver using story provides "a chance to guide the child or adolescent to listen to the truth of the master, sacred story that they've inherited from their community of meaning. . . . Listening to the sacred story of the religious community provides necessary guidance in making it through what often appears to be the amoral, ambiguous dilemmas of our age" (224).

- Narratives from work settings allow people "to reflect upon and share the sacred moments that occur in their work" (Karl 2002, 29). Drawn from experiences in chaplaincy and pastoral counseling, this pastoral counselor argues that in stories "we see

virtues unfold that make good work possible—patience, dedication, compassion, courage, gentleness. We discover complex spiritual practices that prepare the worker’s soul” (38). Theologically, “we sense the healing and redeeming activity of God mediated through daily work routines. . . . We re-member our broken off fragments of self and world and become centered in what makes us whole.” Stories that

lie at the edges of our work . . . are so richly composed and can tell us so much about ourselves, each other, and God’s presence in our lives. . . . We remember ourselves, reassemble our souls, and feel for a moment a sacred wholeness. We know that some small labors of our lives are linked to the Great, on-going Labor of the Creation (38, 40).

Here again, we are reminded of the theological move of *imitatio dei* as an antidote to narcissism.

□ Pastoral care to lesbian and gay people, and overcoming the prejudices of the uncomprehending and unsympathetic heterosexual majority can be assisted using the insights of narrative theology (Griffin 1999). The narrative model does not begin in categorical judgment, but “requires listening to the individual’s story in order to determine merit and to provide support for her or his needs for wholeness” (215). Theologically, through the pastoral use of narratives, “the lesbian or gay individual is allowed space to free herself or himself from the pathology of self-denial or self-hatred. In these narratives, the individuals moved beyond the feelings of shame and guilt and low self-esteem to a state of peace, experiencing God’s love, care and presence in her or his life” (216).

□ For those who are poor, “narrative therapy offers a model . . . to see themselves in a new and empowering light through the re-storying of their own lives” (Dudley-Thompson 1999, 183). In particular, allowing poor persons to tell their

narratives combats the diagnostic and objectifying oppression of labeling them as “the poor,” with the automatic attribution of all the socially undesirable traits that such labeling entails. The poor person, “through re-authoring her life . . . can move from the fossilized world of someone else’s authority—particularly that of the middle class ‘haves’—to the fluid, ever-changing, open-ended reinterpretation of her self, which in turn gives new meaning to her experience” (187). Theologically, “as we enter into each other’s stories, we reduce the tendency toward distance and moral detachment which, when divorced from experience, substitutes cognition for pathos and defends the vested interests of middle-class ‘absentee advocates.’” Sharing narratives in the context of a church food pantry can give rise to “a potential model of peace and justice through solidarity with those who are poor. There in the food pantry, the workers are genuinely, and actively engaged in Christ-like loving of their neighbor” (188-189).

Summary of Pastoral Applications of Narrative Theology

Lynch and Willows provide a useful summary of the ways in which narratives can be used in pastoral care:

The qualities, skills and boundaries utilised by pastoral practitioners will have a significant influence on the degree to which their clients feel able to narrate their experience openly in those relationships. At the same time, however, pastoral carers and counsellors may sometimes feel it is necessary to engage actively with the stories that their clients tell in order to enable truer, or fuller, or more constructive narratives to be developed. For example, it may be helpful to focus on recurrent themes or story-lines which dominate the way in which a client describes their experiences and which exclude other possibilities. Alternatively, drawing on narrative approaches developed within family therapy, pastoral practitioners may wish to try to help their clients to ‘re-author’ their stories, deconstructing versions of events which are unhelpful or hopeless and reconstructing new stories which offer the client more hope and meaning. The pastoral carer or counsellor might also wish to attend to the wider cultural stories (whether religious or not) which influence the individual stories told by their client, and to

challenge these wider cultural narratives where these are oppressive or damaging. In actively engaging with clients' narratives, pastoral practitioners can understand their work in psychological terms as the uncovering and narration of previously unexpressed experience. Or in political terms, this process can be seen as the challenging of accounts of existence which deny or distort experience. Alternatively, this engagement can be understood in theological terms as a process of helping clients to tell their stories in a way that is closer to the truth and meaning that lies at the heart of our existence (Lynch and Willows 1998, 31).

It will be noted that only the first of the specific applications discussed above involves a situation that would be reflected in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV*. Many of the situations a pastoral caregiver will encounter, in fact, have nothing to do with psychopathology or family dysfunction. Thus, in so far as narrative therapy is proposed as an alternative paradigm to those deriving from classical psychodynamic theories and their successors, it may provide a more appropriate lens and a more effective set of tools to deal with the variety of counseling issues that today's pastor might face. Moreover, especially in creatively synthesizing understandings such as Gerkin's, narrative allows us to integrate attention to the spiritual dimensions of our parishioners' lives, to support them in their project of soul-making, and to deepen their personal relationship with God. In the final chapter, I suggest how this might be done in a specific area of pastoral concern: the care of those who are dying or those who are bereaved.

Chapter Three

AN EXAMPLE OF NARRATIVE THEOLOGY IN PRACTICE: BEREAVEMENT AS A DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONE IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Death and loss engender deep and complex emotions, at least in safe, stable communities where death is not such an everyday occurrence as to dull our ability to respond. For the survivors, death disrupts our lives, stresses our physical and emotional coping systems, and may leave us vulnerable to depression and illness. For Christian believers, it is naturally a time when they turn even more faithfully to God for guidance and support. But for believers and nonbelievers alike, this time of disruption can be an opportunity to deepen and enrich our relationship to God; it can also be a time when that relationship is severely tested and even damaged.

In the course of human development, there are milestone events, such as a child's starting school, or reaching puberty, or graduating from high school or college, or leaving the house to start an independent life. The death of our grandparents and parents are also normal developmental milestones. Unanticipated death, such as the death of a child, or death by violence, are violations of the expected progression of time, and are therefore not milestones in the same sense. They violate our sense of life's natural progression; we cannot see them coming, nor do we ordinarily plan ahead for them. But in the relationship with God that is continuously woven for each of us as the fabric of our lives, death itself—whether anticipated or unanticipated—along with the grief it brings, should

always be considered an inevitable part of life. As such, every death is a milestone, a learning moment, an invitation to bring the divine into clearer focus.

This final chapter of my essay on narrative theology is a reflection on some of the ways in which the experience of death, loss, and grief, for both the dying person and the loved ones, can function as a milestone in our relationship to God. With the insights of narrative theology and narrative counseling as context and prologue, I hope to show how this set of normal human experiences can provide opportunities to explicate the text of our lives in relation to God. I posit that the encounter with God can be during any of four phases of the process of loss and grief: (1) the time while the beloved person is in the process of decline and death; (2) the reminiscence by the survivors of the beloved one's life; (3) the period of grief and mourning; (4) and the period of reintegration, when grief has subsided, and the bereaved have come back to something like their "normal life." During each of these phases there are possibilities for challenge, struggle, and renewal in the connections to God that each of us discovers and lives into.

The approach taken here shares an objective with an interesting and useful article by Reisz (1992), who develops a pastoral theology for the ministry to the dying by "reflecting upon the psychological-emotional stages of dying in light of their expression of a person's relationship with God and God's presence with and for them" (184). By correlating the stages of grief, or emotional states, proposed by Kübler-Ross with Paul Tillich's principles of new being (awareness, freedom, relatedness, and transcendence), Reisz provides practical guidelines for pastoral ministry that support Tillich's principles for "what is necessary to be meaningfully human and living" (185).

The Process of Dying: A Test of God

As the dying person declines, outcomes are still uncertain. Might the person pull through after all? Will the person last long enough to attend the grandchild's wedding or see the new baby? Will the person's suffering increase before the end? When outcomes are unclear and there are specific things we want, we may begin to test our relationship to God. "OK," we might say, "I'm in distress here, and it's time for you to do your thing. I've led a good life for you, and, if you're really up there, you'll come through with the outcome I need." We engage in the well-known "bargaining" phase of Kübler-Ross's stages of grief. We bargain for recovery, for a peaceful and painless death, for survival just long enough to see some major event. Like Moses, Gideon, and others in scripture, we ask that God perform some specific tricks to show that God really exists, that God has power, that it has really been worthwhile to believe in God. We may threaten, consciously or not, to withdraw our belief if God does not "come through."

This test of God is related to the presence or absence of hope. Hope is as necessary as oxygen to a life fully lived. James Cone tells us, "Without hope you die, and there are a lot of dead people walking around out there" (quoted in Richardson 2000, 75). Life-threatening illness or injury is a major turning point in an individual narrative, and a growing body of medical and nursing literature indicates that at these junctures "hope enhances the quality and even the quantity of life. Hope helps people to deal with their feelings and to cope with their illness. Hope affects immunity and survival" (Richardson 2000, 83).

Hope addresses, in Donald Capps' phrase, "fundamental questions about the worthwhileness of life itself" (Capps 1997, 144). Capps contends

that pastors are primarily providers or agents of hope. They may be other things as well, but offering hope is central to what they do. . . . Pastoral care differs from all other forms of care in that its primary objective is to enable others to have—or to recognize that they have had—religious experiences of hope (147, 149).

The pastor may need to gently lead the person to remember that God is not to be tested according to our requirements, and that hope may not always be obtainable or recognizable according to the terms we set.

In the experience of dying, hope can be eroded by unrelieved suffering. In the experience of suffering,

we feel destitute, forlorn, forsaken by God. We are no longer motivated to live—perhaps we no longer know how to live. . . . Perhaps it is precisely in this forsaken place that we begin a new relationship with soul and with God. . . . In a sense, we move from being passive in our relationship with God to becoming active participants. In the agony of feeling forsaken, we begin to question who this God is, and who we are in relation to God. . . . It is as if being forced deeply within ourselves has brought us into a new connection with ourselves and with God (Barrett 1999, 468-469).

Yet, in that "forsaken place [where] we begin a new relationship with soul and with God," hope can be born anew. In beginning to question who God is and who we are in relation to God, we begin to create a new narrative about our relationship to God. In testing God we are testing ourselves, of course; we are testing our fortitude and spiritual resilience in being able to forge a new relationship with God, to begin a new narrative of God's power in our lives.

Under the burdensome and technological system of health care we have in the United States, death can be a complex of ethical quandaries (Nuland 1994; Cohen et al. 2000). Negotiating the ethics of end-of-life care—with or without the support of "the

system,” health care professionals, knowledgeable friends and colleagues—may help us detect the workings of God in our community and in our society. The decisions we are forced to make with or on behalf of our loved one will send us to a re-examination of our basic values, to a sounding of the depth and meaning of our love, and to a sometimes agonizing search for what actions will best express those values and that love. Whether we feel that God’s guidance is there for us, and whether we feel “the system” and its values are arrayed against us, can affect our belief and trust in God—for better or for worse. Does God’s love, and any kind of ethical standard that flows from it, really operate in the world we live in? We may look to the dying person’s treatment by the world during the last weeks and days—by friends, by the community, by health care professionals—to answer that question.

Relationships of the loved one with survivors, and of the survivors with each other, may be under strain during the period of dying and after. The ability of the relationships to become or to remain “right” is a test of God’s presence in that family or that circle of friends. For instance, Peter VanKatwyk explores a narrative perspective on parental loss and marital grief, and shows how parental loss can disrupt the family narrative in ways that bring God’s presence into question.

Parental loss disrupts the natural order of life and death, experienced as a jarring loss in meaning. Parental loss also violates the marital myth of producing the ideal child and protecting this child against all harm. After Martina’s sudden and violent death, Peter and Myra [the parents] identify with the accident, feeling left to die ‘on the side of the road’—what has happened does not fit the conjugal myth. The loss of a child challenges faith in the image of God as a strong and caring parent (VanKatwyk 1998, 376).

In the face of a disrupted conjugal narrative, VanKatwyk finds that “narrative pastoral care attends to the stories of suffering by focusing on signals of the courage to

live. . . . The narrative, which typically joins two separate lives, carries deeply religious yearnings for reconciliation, restoration, and resolution. Pastoral care with couples attends to the courage-to-be edge in the marital narrative” (VanKatwyk 1998, 374-375). In other words, the pastoral listener will hear the narrative of grief and suffering with patient openness, and will help the bereaved locate for themselves the themes and images of hope within the narrative. Nurturing right relationships through truth-telling and compassionate communication represent both a responsibility and a potential for grace of the patient-caregiver relationship (Cohen et al. 2000, 63).

Although it is important not to see aging people as dying people, it nevertheless becomes increasingly clear to the aging person and his or her loved ones that with the passage of time the final chapter of the person’s narrative is being written. Avis Clendenen sensitively deals with the “unfinished business” that intergenerational families often need—and yet so frequently fail—to resolve. Relating this final chapter to Erikson’s last developmental stage of integrity vs. despair, Clendenen cites Karl Rahner in recognizing that human development never reaches an endpoint, “that the task of human unfolding cannot be avoided, and in spite of all the difficult hurdles and obstacles life seems to present to us, we are either, in freedom and grace, moving in the direction of our becoming in God or in the direction of a radical self-refusal toward God” (Clendenen 2000, 130). If, after a long and productive life, the aging person’s final chapter is written with the theme of despair rather than integrity, there can be great strain on the family, as Clendenen shows, and the “test of God” may result not in healing, but in unexpected brokenness and lingering pain.

Finally, of course, the dying person may be perfectly intentional in taking this last opportunity to get in right relationship with God. whether it means making a final confession, reconciling with estranged friends or relatives, or talking specifically about her personal faith. Here we will do well to remember, along with Sykes and Ricoeur, the “wordless quality” of the point where God’s story interacts with our own, and “the theological theme of God’s ineffability.”

The Completed Chapter: A Witness of God

When a person dies, the role that his or her life played in ours comes to a kind of end. No new events or conversations will occur in our life with that person. Memory alone will take over, and bring that person’s life back to us in our mind’s eye, slowly reshaping the past to adjust to our own ongoing and changing present. The chapter in our lives that was associated with the dead person is closed, to become a kind of biography or memoir, which few of us ever bother to write down. Each person connected to the one who died will have a different version of that biography, a different sense of the shape of that person’s life. Reflecting on that shape can be, for each of us, a means of coming closer to an understanding of God’s working in this world, a glimpse of one incarnation of God’s creative energy.

Looking back through the closure of death, we can detect, in our unwritten biography of the life just ended, the person’s joys, challenges met and not met, inevitable weaknesses and surprising strengths. We can read and reread the biography and appreciate it as a work of art whose vocabulary, style, technique, form, and spirit make a

sense unique to us. We can share our sense with other bereaved ones, but it will never be exactly the same as theirs; there will always be subtle disagreements about how the story goes, what the work of art actually looked like.

Unless a mourner is stuck in idealization of the deceased, memories retained and retrieved will be a mix of happy, sad, and painful. Idealization, unfortunately, destroys the accuracy of all memories, for it makes the deceased into one-dimensional saints, devoid of flaw but also devoid of humanity. . . . The happy and painful must be remembered together, for both are necessary to tell the full story of any human life (Culbertson 2000, 241-242).

And in the multifaceted complexity of just one person we can see an analog to the mystery of God. We see and try to extract meaning from a life that God has shaped. In trying to figure out the meaning of the dead person's life in our life, we echo and practice the Christological project of trying to understand the meaning and presence of Christ's life in ours. Meaning is not extracted from the story in a single stroke of hermeneutical acumen, but accrues and develops over multiple retellings of the narrative.

Memories need to be shared again and again. Stories will need to be told and retold. . . . We can always reinterpret the stories, and as we do so, we can deepen our appreciation of the values and meanings they reveal. We cannot completely and definitively interpret stories in principle, since each retelling comes at a different point in our lives, and we bring changing background experiences, perspectives, interests, needs, and desires to the interpretive context. . . . As we grow older, these same narratives become our link with the past and part of the heritage that we bequeath to the future by passing them down to the generations that follow (Culbertson 2000, 242).

The concept of "life-review" in counseling and therapy is an instrument to explore this milestone, especially for those who grieve for their own aging and who prepare for their own death (Culbertson 2000, 242). Narratives of family history, "particularly reflecting myths, events, and relationships that have shaped the identity of family members," are often told around the deathbed, allowing a family "to review where the family has come from and how members interact with one another" (Culbertson 2000,

243). These narratives, shared in community, can begin a kind of anamnesis that deepens the meanings a family or community creates for itself.

Grief and Loss: A Conversation with God

In some sense we converse with God during all the phases described here, but in the final absence of the beloved one, we are confronted with our own private grief process, whose intensity and duration we can neither predict nor completely control. Negotiating this process one day at a time, and living with the psychic pain that greets us every morning, can seem like an ongoing discussion with God. Each tear and sigh, each attempt to suck it up and get on with our lives, can seem like our part of the conversation; while each piercing memory breaking in unbidden, each moment of embarrassed silence from our friends and co-workers, each heartfelt and apt word from those brave enough to try to console, and each poignant, surprising, and seemingly irrelevant distraction like a bright buttercup or long forgotten passage of Brahms will appear to be God's beneficent or neglectful response to us.

The intense, overpowering nature of our grief and suffering can take us beyond ourselves, to a region where the voice of God can be more clearly heard:

We know there are limitations beyond which our egos cannot take us. We have learned that God need not respond to our cries immediately. We learn that God's responses may not be what our egos had imagined. No longer tied only to the rational and the logical, we become receptive in a new way.

God becomes an autonomous Other. God is no longer experienced merely as a good idea, something that nurses and protects us from our fear of annihilation. God is not something we think up or imagine. God is beyond our ability to imagine. God responds to us in God's way, making us aware of an inconceivably larger force and reality.

Knowing God as Other is important. For only when God is experienced as truly Other, as separate from ego's construction, can a relationship with God begin. Only when we know God to be autonomous can we voluntarily choose relationship. Only then

do we listen to God's voice, knowing it to be different from ego's ideas about who God is. To hear God in this new way is the beginning of a new life. It is the beginning of Love (Barrett 1999, 469).

If the church community is functioning effectively, God's response can also be heard in how that community supports our grief, providing social support, sharing its strength with us, and simply providing caring friends who will listen.

Anglicanism maintains that humans are social at root, that Christian faith is corporate, and that we are interdependent creatures. Consequently we have a duty to sustain—and, if necessary, to create—communities of care for each other and to be open, present, and attentive to one another near the end of life (Cohen et al. 2000, 76-77).

Reintegration: A New Relation to God

How mourners re-enter their normal lives from a time of acute grief can have much to do with how their relationship with God will develop. If their test of God, or their witness of God's presence, or their conversation with God has been problematic, then anger, rather than acceptance and resolution, might well be the result. If consolation has truly been forthcoming from the community, if the beloved person's passing contained moments of grace and reflected instances of prayerful and ethical behavior, then one might well have a renewed and strengthened sense of the Holy Spirit working in one's life. As our minds and our spirits become less gripped by the sensation-blocking experience of grief, we can begin to look back on the whole process of dying and mourning to see how we might have been changed. Perhaps the beloved person has left us with specific new responsibilities in the world—to finish his or her work, to look after children, to administer a property or a business. If the person controlled or made strong judgments about aspects of our life, his or her voice will no longer be actively heard, only

remembered; this may allow us a new sense of ownership over that aspect, a new sense of direction, or it may leave us feeling rudderless. With those new responsibilities, or that new ownership, or the feelings of confusion, may come a new sense of our role in the world, and with that new sense may come a revised understanding of our relationship with God.

Kornfeld echoes the conclusion of pastoral theologians and researchers “that successful grief work is about reintegration and redefinition of both the individual mourner’s self and the family as well. . . . Because the reintegration of the mourner’s self is done through memory, counselors can encourage those who are mourning to reminisce about the person who died and about their life together” (Kornfeld 2001, 216).

Deborah Barrett, a psychotherapist, experienced a profound spiritual movement during the time immediately surrounding the death of her seven-year-old son. “Over time, I began to wonder about that experience. It seemed to lead me into a new relationship with myself, with my God, and with others. Suffering seemed to result in healing and transformation” (Barrett 1999, 461). In the darkness of suffering, Barrett reports, a sense of “something Other” is called forth: “It is as if being forced deeply within ourselves has brought us into a new connection with ourselves and with God. . . . We see it as a response from God.” (469).

The Pastor’s Role

According to Kornfeld, “clergy and other counselors in community share our culture’s aversion to the process of dying. They, too, are afraid of death. In trying not to

think about death, they become preoccupied by obsessive concerns about health and they dread aging. They value youth because they fear death” (Kornfeld 2001, 199). The first task for the pastoral caregiver who wishes to assist the dying and those who mourn, then, is to do the personal work necessary to overcome this cultural dread of death and dying. This work might be especially important for young clergy who might not have begun to experience the death of their own loved ones, as well as older clergy who have—in other words, it is essential work for all clergy regardless of age or emotional maturity. An excellent place to start is Sherwin Nuland’s *How We Die: Reflections on Life’s Final Chapter*. In our age of supposed individual freedom, how we die—in hospital or at home, in pain or not, surrounded by technology and technicians or by friends—can theoretically be a matter of our choice; Nuland gives us the medical and physiological information we need to begin making these choices. He explicates how the culture of physicians, particularly specialists, often prevents them from considering any options but those that prolong biological life, even if all that means is to prolong the agony of the person’s physical and spiritual dying. For pastors accompanying their parishioners during the last part of life’s journey, assisting them to write the last few pages of their narrative, it cannot but add credibility to the pastor’s authority about the life to come that she or he understand and be fully present to the physical realities of the last moments of this life, to which Nuland’s book is an excellent introduction.

Beyond learning about the physical realities, however, a pastor needs to examine her or his own feelings about death, and learn as much as possible about her or his own narratives. Kornfeld recommends a self-inventory where the pastor examines personal

fears surrounding death, including the fear of helplessness and the unknown. Exploration of these questions can take place with “support and counsel from trusted friends, professional peers, or other counselors” (Kornfeld 2001, 200).

The pastor can also help to make a space for the narratives of the dying person, the family, and the community to be told. Interestingly, one place where this space for narrative is apparently not made available is during the rite for “The Burial of the Dead.” In making a strict distinction, in the Roman Catholic rite, between the brief homily appropriate to a funeral and a eulogy “centered on the accomplishments of the individual,” the *Order of Christian Funerals* seeks “to prevent funeral homilies from becoming a speech of praise for the accomplishments of the deceased” (Waznak 1998, 118). Regarding practice in the Episcopal Church, Stuhlman notes that the celebrant using the Burial Rite from *The Book of Common Prayer* is to preach “a homily and not a eulogy. Its purpose is to draw out the way in which the lessons speak to the particular situation. Caution should be used if a relative or friend gives the homily: this may be emotionally difficult, and the person may find it hard to present a homily rather than a eulogy” (Stuhlman 1987, 173).

It is beyond the scope of this essay to explore in depth the issues related to extended eulogizing of the deceased in a funeral, or why the fond reminiscences of relatives and friends may be liturgically inappropriate during the course of the burial rite. Suffice it to say that in the liturgy of burial there is very little that addresses the personal narrative of the departed, and its reflection of a developmental relationship to God (Stuhlman 1987; 1995). If, as I have suggested, various points in the dying and grieving

processes can be “learning moments” in our unfolding relationship with God, then when and where can the minister take advantage of these moments and help the dying person and the bereaved begin the learning process? In the Episcopal Church the Burial (Rite II) seems focused almost solely on the resurrection and transcendental concerns and contains only two moments that address the immediate situation of grief—the Prayers of the People (BCP, 497) and one of the eight options for additional prayers at the consecration of the grave (BCP, 505). The explanation, of course, is that “the liturgy for the dead is an Easter liturgy. It finds all its meaning in the resurrection. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we, too, shall be raised” (BCP, 507).

How pastoral assistance of grief work might be linked with the liturgical requirements of the Burial Rite is also beyond the scope of this essay. Perhaps it is the job of the minister to find a way, through selective citation of details of the life just concluded, to make the resurrection message particularly applicable to that family and community’s situation, and to help them discover for themselves how they have encountered God in the passing of their beloved one. Perhaps further exploration of the links between the narrative of the departed and the narrative of God is to be reserved for a separate memorial service, or a counseling or pastoral session scheduled with the family and mourners, or both.

Birth, marriage, and death are the life milestones where the church is most commonly called to participate in the life of an individual or a family. Of these, I might argue, it is death that offers the most potential for effecting spiritual change and growth. Perhaps this is not fair: better to say that birth and marriage offer an opening toward

growth through a moment of great joy while death's opening is through suffering, or release from suffering. Integrating the experience of suffering into our lives, accepting the pain of death and bereavement as normal and unavoidable aspects of life, can bring several benefits, what Barrett calls "the gifts of suffering":

Suffering has the potential to transform, deepen, and enliven our experience of ourselves and our relationships with others. The trick is to have the courage to enter into the experience of suffering, and to have the faith to be able to endure it. Aborted suffering cannot transform. . . .

What happens when we honor our suffering? Perhaps first and foremost, we find a way to be compassionate with ourselves. We learn to allow our suffering. Honoring suffering brings about a change in consciousness where we are no longer obsessed with finding a way to get over it, around it, or out of it, but with finding the way *through* it. Suffering becomes part of the journey of life, rather than an unfortunate and embarrassing aberration. We learn to value the part of ourselves that suffers, the part that goes below the surface, that finds itself in humility, in the dark earth of its experience. We learn to find our way beyond the eternal hell of self-damnation.

To journey into and through the underworld of suffering is one thing. To relate our experiences of the journey is another. This seems essential. For when we have made the journey, and have returned again from Suffering's grasp, we are changed. No longer afraid of the journey, we have the capacity to see and help others who are also suffering. This means that we no longer feel compelled to deny the suffering of others, but can hear and embrace their suffering in such a way that we can help them stay with their experience until it bears them back into the light.

One of the implications of this is that we can extend our courage to another, who can then continue in faith. Another person can be aided in enduring the crumbling of an old self while a new one begins very subtly to take form. Growth can happen. Relationships can deepen. Ultimately, this creates the possibility for human love (Barrett 1999, 471).

"To relate our experiences of the journey . . . seems essential." In other words, it is in the telling of our narratives, sharing them with others and allowing them to share theirs with us, that we bring ourselves into deeper relationship one with another, and individually and collectively with God.

Unitarian minister Forrest Church speaks of reading through all seventeen of Patrick O'Brian's Aubrey/Maturin series of novels of British seafarers during the

Napoleonic era, and, coming to the end of the series, “learning something about what it means to die.”

We know what it is like when others leave. Our parents, friends, heroes. But what about us? When I closed the last page of O’Brian’s saga, I experienced what it must be like. For an odd, even eerie moment, I was gone and they went on. The story continued, as all stories continue: ‘Yes, I will’; ‘No, you mustn’t’; children and then grandchildren; successes, failures; startling reversals; familiar exchanges; this war and then the next war; ‘Believe me!’; ‘I’m sorry.’ The story continued, but I didn’t. They lived on; I died. I stopped, and the eighteenth novel opened without me

But that’s the way it is. Our lives stop in the middle. They don’t reach a conclusion, they simply stop. The middle of every story is where all our stories end. . . . (Church 1996, 151).

The narrative of our relationship with God does not stop in the middle. As the narrative draws to its earthly close, it may not make complete sense to us, but the resurrection tells us that the narrative goes on—for each of us toward its own individual, unknowable, unending, “ineffable” continuation. What we can detect through identifying and interpreting the milestones along the way of our story are the directions that relationship takes, directions either toward or away from God. The graced pastor can provide witness, consolation, and hermeneutical guidance—sometimes toward understanding, but perhaps more often toward a patient waiting in the indeterminacy of the outcome; not all plots end in ways that we can readily understand. Jumping too quickly toward a neatly rounded plot-ending of someone else’s narrative, stating too definitively for someone else how the story goes, or how it gets resolved, is the same presumptuous danger as finding reasons for God’s allowing us to suffer; it can lead us into the pastoral trap of theodicy, and into self-deceit. Letting the dying or bereaved person and their loved ones tell their own stories and sitting in watchful, attentive silence

is the more pastoral choice, and allowing them to find their own way to God within the story the more pastoral goal.

CONCLUSION: NARRATIVE THEOLOGY AND “THE VALE OF SOUL-MAKING”

In the Preface to this essay I declared myself “a reluctant postmodern,” and suggested that the postmodern critique of modernism was perhaps an echo—perhaps merely an encore—of Romanticism’s critique of the Enlightenment. The epigraph to this essay is taken from one of the last letters of John Keats, perhaps the most astonishingly brilliant of all the English Romantic poets. The writers encountered throughout this essay are all concerned with how the self derives meaning out of experience—whether existential or theological. In both instances they believe that narrative is somehow implicated, and one of the key aspects of narrative to which they point to support their claim is the manner in which it captures time and gives time meaning. Time is discussed over and over again as consisting of past, present, and future, the beginning, middle, and end of narrative plot. A contemporary scholar of pastoral care, James Ashbrook, proposes something even more fundamental: *“I submit that soul expresses meaning, and the making of meaning depends upon memory.”*

Without working memory nothing is personally meaningful. Without that which is personally meaningful we have no unique identity. Without connecting present and past we have no sense of continuity. Without a sense of continuity we lack a sense of self. In truth we lack a soul—that basic structuring of our unique essence. . . . I suggest that working memory makes up the core or essence (in an experiential sense) of a functioning person. . . .

The making of meaning requires purposeful behavior, and purposeful behavior is the result of working memory. . . .

The idea of soul identifies our uniqueness—our capacity for centered decisions, initiative, and a sense of coherence. . . .

Quite simply, I submit that soul constitutes that which each of us can call our own, that which distinguishes us from everything else in creation. (Ashbrook 1991, 160-165, emphases in the original).

Memory as a core creative force was certainly not an alien concept to the Romantics, nor to any of the literary artists who followed, whether lyric poet or novelist. Memory as thus conceived is a richer, more creative force than the chronological recording mechanism that Crites posits in describing the narrative quality of experience.

If one accepts the argument that our understanding of our experience is essentially narrative, then one might also wish to consider that narrative itself is impossible without memory, and neither memory nor narrative come to us without interpretation. Another pastoral scholar, whom we have already met, is relevant here:

The hermeneutical perspective has become for me a way of seeing the life of the self or, in more Christian terms, the life of the soul. That life is first and fundamentally a life of interpretation of experience. It is in the joining of event of experience and interpretive meaning that the life of the soul takes place (Gerkin 1984, 34).

In the unfolding of the soul, then, memory and time, narrative and experience, action and meaning, our story and “The Story”—all meet, and through the sharing of narrative the individual self engages the world, Keats’s “vale of Soul-making,” in an ineffable, interpretive, and dialogic dance.

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